



**Memorandum Re: S.17 - An Act Relating to Sheriff Reforms**

**Karen Tronsgard-Scott, Executive Director**

**April 26, 2023**

Thank you for the opportunity to provide input on S.17. The Vermont Network Against Domestic and Sexual Violence represents 15 independent Member Organizations who provide direct services to victims of domestic and sexual violence. In 2022, these organizations provided in-person support to 8,241 people and answered over 19,000 hotline calls from Vermonters seeking information and advocacy related to violence.

**Issue of Concern**

We would like to address a small but critically important issue in Section 6 of S.17 – sheriffs accompanying survivors to retrieve personal belongs – often referred to as “standbys”. Sheriffs often accompany survivors to their homes so they may safely collect their possessions after a Relief from Abuse (RFA) Order has been issued. Many Sheriffs charge survivors fees for this assistance, but many do not charge a fee. Because the fees are most often not affordable to survivors, our Member Organizations often use their own funds, when available, to cover these expenses. While these fees vary from department to department, they range from \$75 to \$150 per hour and many include a minimum number of hours. In addition, some Sheriffs’ Departments also include mileage charges. Combined, non-profit organizations and survivors themselves are paying thousands of dollars per year to access protection when removing belongings in the wake of violence.

Our concerns related to this practice are:

- **Charging survivors to access safety.** For survivors who need to remove items pursuant to a relief from abuse order, standby assistance from a law enforcement agency should be provided free of charge. It is noteworthy that the State of Vermont has made a policy decision to cover the cost of domestic violence offender accountability programs with no charge to participants. While we fully support this policy decision, survivors are simultaneously charged in order to safely remove belongings from abusive homes.
- **Geographic Inequity.** There is wide variation and lack of consistency in the fees charged, and whether they are charged, across counties in Vermont. Fees range from \$0 to hundreds of dollars, resulting in significant geographic injustice for survivors based on their county of residence.

**Proposed Amendment**

After conversations with the Sheriffs Association, the Network is requesting the language below in S.17 to ensure that Sheriffs provide this assistance without any charging a fee to the survivor or any of their



representatives. The Network is happy to work with the Sheriffs over the summer and fall to collect and assess data to help inform any future decisions related to this issue.

Sec. 6. 24 V.S.A. § 293 is amended to read:

§ 293. DUTIES ((d) is from the Senate-passed version and (e) would be new language)

(d) Sheriff's departments providing law enforcement services in the county in which an individual who has a relief from abuse order pursuant to 15 V.S.A. § 1103 resides shall have a duty to assist in the retrieval of personal belongings of the individual and that individual's dependents from the individual's residence. A sheriff's department shall not seek a fee from the individual being assisted in the retrieval of personal belongings from the residence or any representative of that individual.

(e) On or before January 15, 2024, the Vermont Sheriffs Association shall work with the Vermont Network Against Domestic and Sexual Violence to gather data related to retrieval of person belongings pursuant to subdivision (d) of this subsection.